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ABSTRACT

The transition from high school to college can be challenging and stressful for any student; it can prove to be an overwhelming experience for disabled students. Among major problems disabled students experience are: the perception that disabled persons are passive and need assistance in all areas; a lack of awareness of their rights and responsibilities regarding the proper use of support services; and the inability of postsecondary student development specialists to determine to what extent a student's academic needs may have been met in the past. Among recommendations for high school counselors and others involved in preparing disabled students for college are: motivate students to learn more about their disability, devices, and learning style; make students aware of attitudinal barriers and help them to develop appropriate strategies for overcoming them; direct parents and students to begin the search for an appropriate college as early as possible; make students aware of educational and career opportunities; promote the use of community resources; involve students in extracurricular activities and work experiences; develop information-sharing programs between secondary and postsecondary institutions; and provide opportunities for students to meet with successful disabled college students. (CB)

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Bridging the Gap: College Preparation for Disabled Students

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Abstract

By acknowledging that architectural barriers are no longer major obstacles for the disabled student seeking a post-secondary education, this paper will address the role of secondary school counselors and post-secondary student development specialists in preparing disabled high school students for college. Specific attention will be focused on an examination of selected critical problems that disabled students may encounter in the post-secondary arena. Final recommendations will include the identification of the general academic, social, and consumer skills needed to enpower the disabled student for successful college experience.

Bridging the Gap: College Preparation

For Disabled Students

Since architectural and physical barriers are no longer major obstacles for disabled students seeking a post-secondary education, the number of disabled students seeking a college education can be expected to increase. The actual increase of disabled freshmen students has been verified by the recent annual survey, The American Freshman: National Norms (all disabilities) which indicates a threefold increase in the incidence of disabled freshmen over the past eight years (Heath, 1986). Accordingly, post-secondary educators are now faced with an expanding enrollment of disabled students; many of these students will require an array of support services. In attempting to meet the needs of disabled students making the successful transition from high school to college, post-secondary educators are confronted with several problems. Moreover, although most colleges are attempting to make the needed accommodations for disabled students, recent evidence seems to reveal that for various reasons, disabled students are not experiencing success at the college level (Harris, 1984). It must be pointed out that although making the transition from high school to college can be a challenging and stressful experience for any student, it can prove to be an overwhelming experience for some disabled students who may often experience, for the first time, problems that their non-disabled peers may have encountered much earlier (Nugent, 1978). Thus, a major contributor to the success of disabled students may include bridging the gap between high school and college by assisting students in pre-college academic and social preparation. Therefore, this paper will address some of the major problems that disabled students may encounter and provide recommendations for alleviating these problems, thereby establishing the foundation for a successful college experience.

One of the major problems that disabled students and post-secondary service providers experience includes the perception that disabled persons are passive and need assistance in all areas. Along these lines, a closely related corollary is that physical limitations imply mental limitations (Huss, 1983). These myths and perceptions may be reflected in the actions of professional helpers, instructors, and able-bodied students. Disabled high school students should profit from being informed that faculty attitudes and behavior towards disabled students have the potential to enhance their integration into the college community or pose a formidable barrier which can be a greater obstacle than the more commonly considered architectural barrier (Nathanson, 1983).

A second challenge for disabled students includes the fact that some disabled students may be unaware of their specific rights and responsibilities in regards to the proper use of support services. This is a crucial area, especially for those students who have spent years in secondary environments where special education teachers and specialists may have tutored them in academic subjects routinely arranged all other support activities without consulting with the students (Dexter, 1982). Consequently, as in-coming college students, these disabled students may be unaware of the shift in their responsibilities, and they may also have failed to develop the necessary social and decision-making skills needed to negotiate necessary support services. These skills are vital for the success of any college student. Moreover, the predominance of this problem is further substantiated when one observes that while the mainstreaming movement which occurred as a result of Public Law 94-142 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 has brought increasing numbers of disabled students through elementary and secondary schools and onto

the college campus (Quinby, 1984), these laws may have inadvertently created a new set of problems. While P.L. 94-142 and Section 504 are similar in mandating equal access to educational opportunities, a major contrast exists in the context of service delivery and the assumption of responsibility (Scales, 1986). P.L. 94-142 mandates that disabled students on the preschool, elementary, and high school levels be identified and offered services to equalize their educational opportunities; this law places the greatest responsibility on the educational institution for identifying, assessing and servicing the disabled student population. On the other hand, Section 504 mandates equal access on the college level but assumes that students are best equipped to identify and assess their educational needs. Section 504 does not require the educational institution to offer services unless these services are requested, thereby placing the greatest responsibility on the student (Scales, 1986). This abrupt change in the assumption of responsibility can be devastating for students who have never been required to assess or identify their educational or personal needs.

Accordingly, a third area of concern is that post-secondary student development specialists are often unable to determine to what extent a student's academic needs may have been met in the past. It is always helpful when a student can specify as early in the quarter as possible the exact nature of the services that are needed. For students who lack the ability to articulate their needs or plan ahead, a lag in quality support services can be frustrating experience. Likewise, this problem is often compounded in that secondary school counselors have not been consistently provided with adequate information concerning post-secondary educational opportunities

for disabled students. Although there is a need for an ongoing dialogue between secondary counselors and post-secondary student development specialists, such a dialogue or network has not been firmly established (Quinby, 1983). Consequently, to effectively assist disabled students in bridging the gap between high school and college, it must be emphasized that programs, practices, and resources vary from college to college and that disabled students enrolled at institutions of high education face various problems and responses to these problems (Penn and Dudley, 1980).

Although all of the foregoing problems may not be experienced by every disabled student, many of these barriers can be eliminated by an on-going dialogue or interchange between educational and community service providers. The ultimate goal is to increase the awareness of disabled students concerning the academic, social, and consumer skills needed for success in college.

The following is a list of recommendations for high school counselors and others who may be involved with preparing disabled students for college:

1. Motivate students to learn more about their disability, devices, and learning style.
2. Assist students in becoming aware of attitudinal barriers and in developing appropriate strategies for overcoming them.
3. Direct parents and students to begin the search for an appropriate college as early as possible.
4. Encourage students to visit the college, to gather all needed information on support services, and to confer with service providers as soon as possible.
5. Encourage the parents of disabled high school students to foster the development of decision-making skills.

6. Provide opportunities for students to become aware of educational and career opportunities.

7. Promote the use of community resources such as Vocational Rehabilitation.

8. Stimulate students to become involved in extracurricular activities and appropriate work experiences that can be used to develop social and independent living skills.

9. Develop programs of information-sharing between secondary and post-secondary institutions.

10. Motivate students to read and learn more about civil rights, independent living, and assistive devices.

11. Provide opportunities for high school students to meet with successful disabled college students.

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